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YOUTH IN COMMAND

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I. YOUTH IN COMMAND

Charles J. Crawford*

The Secretary could not succeed in everything he attempted. ...He wanted to encourage the better officers and advance them rapidly; but by now the Army had become accustomed to a system of promotion by seniority, and by seniority in regiment or staff corps at that; and the charms of a system without delicate puzzles were too great for the service to be willing to weigh nice alternatives in order to stimulate and reward merit.

Russell Weigley commenting
on the tenure of Secretary
of War Jefferson Davis
(1853-1857).¹ **

How old was Thomas Jefferson when he wrote the Declaration of Independence? How old was Napoleon when he became emperor of Europe? How old was Trotsky when he helped lead the Russian Revolution? How old was Stonewall Jackson when he became the military idol of the world in the wake of his Valley Campaign?

The answer, from a very personal perspective, is that they were all the same age or younger than I am now (38). Of course, the above examples are extreme, since the people involved were of exceptional quality that one realistically may not hope to match. Further, in areas such as sports or entertainment, where if one is to succeed at all it almost has to be while young, there are quite a few figures that were famous before reaching my age. Some (Lou Gehrig, George Gershwin, Marilyn Monroe) who are remembered as having had full careers were dead at or before age 38.

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**The "notes" cited throughout this paper are given at the end of the primary text, commencing on page 17.

How full a career might a military man expect to have at age 38? As illustrated above, some military men of past eras have done well in high command at or before that age. Might the U.S. armed forces benefit from a program that seeks to put relatively young officers in high command? This paper, using examples from past American wars, examines some of the precedents for such a program.

How valid is it to compare military officers of today to those of previous eras? One consideration in such a comparison is that life spans were shorter in the past, so a person was "older" (i.e., nearer the expected end of usefulness) at a younger age. Another is that there was no mandatory retirement system, so it was common for an officer to stay in the service until death. Since promotion opportunities were based on vacancies within one's own regiment, a lieutenant might have a 50-year-old captain in his way, while the captain might be blocked by a 60-year-old major.

There is probably a direct relationship between the validity of the comparison and the distance one goes back in time. For example, a comparison between military officers today and those who fought in The War Between the States must be qualified rather extensively. Life expectancy, medicine, education, communications, weapons, and many other things affecting the career development of a military officer were vastly different.² Even so, I chose The War Between the States as a place to start because of a longstanding interest in that conflict, and because both sides can be studied as antecedents to today's U.S. forces.

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to examine all the ways in which the conditions of service for military officers during the American Civil War were similar to and different from conditions existing in the U.S. armed forces today or during other wars, but some things that affect this analysis bear mention here. One is the dual regular and volunteer army system which existed during the Civil War. Many officers who held commissions in the regular army were temporarily released from their regiments to assume greater rank in the volunteer force. For example, a captain of the 5th Artillery Regiment (regular U.S. Army) might have taken a commission as a colonel of volunteers to command the 121st New York

Volunteer Infantry Regiment. He might subsequently have been promoted to brigadier general of volunteers, but--when the volunteer army was disbanded at the end of the war--his status within the regular army would have reverted to captain, 5th Artillery. This was quite common.

Another noteworthy aspect was the brevet system, a rather complex way of awarding temporary rank. The Union armies awarded brevets extensively. To return to the same example, the captain of the 5th Artillery, serving as a volunteer colonel of the 121st New York Infantry, might--for a series of commendable performances--have been promoted to brigadier general of volunteers and breveted to major general of volunteers and lieutenant colonel in the regular army. If all his titles were then appended to his name, they would have read: Bvt Maj Gen, U.S.V.; Brig Gen, U.S.V; Bvt Lt Col, U.S.A.; Captain, U.S.A. Normally, only the highest rank was used as a form of address.³

As might be expected, the dual volunteer/regular and brevet systems led to abuses in awarding rank. There was greater willingness to reward an individual for an apparently significant effort if one had the perception that the reward would have no long lasting affect on the rank structure of the regular army. Further, it was permissible to make such promotions (especially below the rank of general) on the spot, so--in the heat of battle--a person might have been promoted for an action that might subsequently be judged insignificant, routine, or even foolish. Nonetheless, had there not been this ability to award rank, it is unlikely that young officers would have achieved high command, since a captain, no matter how talented, would not be placed in charge of a division while retaining a captain's rank.

While rank may be associated with command (i.e., a person wouldn't make brigadier general without some responsibilities as a staff officer or garrison or field commander), I chose command of a field unit in an actively campaigning army as the best measure of an officer's ability. Certainly, mistakes were made in the selection of unit commanders, even discounting the initial year of the war when many commands were given to older, regular army officers who were not up to the task. Still, there was by the end of the Civil War a crop of young, talented, capable, and

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experienced officers who, despite their youth, were the core of leadership of the Army.⁴

→ This analysis involved an examination of the ages of commanders at the division level and above in two of the principal armies (Army of the Potomac for the Union and Army of Northern Virginia for the Confederacy) of the American Civil War. The ages of the men in these positions were surveyed at selected dates over the course of the conflict. The survey began with the armies as they existed at the time of the Peninsula Campaign (April-July 1862). This starting date was chosen because the initial organizational confusion of the first year of the war was past, and many (but not all) of the older, regular army officers and politicians who had been made commanders of large units at the start of the war but proved unequal to the task had been weeded out. McClellan reorganized the Army of the Potomac over the Fall and Winter of 1861-1862, and Lee reorganized the Army of Northern Virginia in June 1862. The survey continued over the course of the war using the dates of selected major campaigns and battles as follows:

Date	Campaign/Battles
-----	-----
June 1862	Seven Days
September 1862	Antietam
May 1863	Chancellorsville
July 1863	Gettysburg
May 1864	Wilderness/Spottsylvania
June 1864	Cold Harbor
April 1865	Appomattox

No partial years were used when calculating ages. For example, if a man was born in June 1823, he was calculated as 39.0 in May 1863 and 40.0 in July 1863. The average age of division, corps, and army commanders is shown in Table 1.⁵

If no unit commanders were killed, cashiered, or promoted, the average age should move steadily upward. One can see an example of this in the Army commander column of Table 1 for the Army of Northern Virginia. From June 1862 until the end of the war in April 1865, Robert E. Lee was the commander, and the average age indeed progressed from 55.0 to 58.0 over the almost three years included in the survey. Similarly, in cases

Table 1
AVERAGE AGE OF COMMANDERS

*Army of the Potomac:**

Date	Infantry		Cavalry		Army
	Division	Corps	Division	Corps	
June 1862	44.2 (11)**	50.2 (5)	53.0 (1)	None	35.0 (1)
September 1862	44.2 (18)	48.4 (7)	38.0 (1)	None	35.0 (1)
May 1863	43.2 (21)	41.1 (7)	32.6 (3)	40.0 (1)	48.0 (1)
July 1863	40.8 (19)	40.0 (7)	31.3 (3)	38.0 (1)	47.0 (1)
May 1864	37.5 (21)	40.3 (6)	30.8 (4)	33.0 (1)	46.5 (2)
June 1864	39.9 (21)	39.5 (6)	30.8 (4)	33.0 (1)	46.5 (2)
April 1865	36.2 (18)	39.3 (7)	34.3 (3)	27.0 (2)	47.5 (2)

Army of Northern Virginia:

Date	Infantry		Cavalry		Army
	Division	Corps	Division	Corps	
June 1862	45.4 (9)	None	29.0 (1)	None	55.0 (1)
September 1862	38.4 (9)	39.5 (2)	29.0 (1)	None	55.0 (1)
May 1863	38.3 (8)	40.5 (2)	30.0 (1)	None	56.0 (1)
July 1863	38.2 (9)	41.6 (3)	30.0 (1)	None	56.0 (1)
May 1864	39.0 (9)	42.6 (3)	33.0 (3)	31.0 (1)	57.0 (1)
June 1864	36.7 (9)	42.3 (3)	28.0 (3)	46.0 (1)	57.0 (1)
April 1865	37.3 (9)	43.5 (4)	29.6 (3)	29.0 (1)	58.0 (1)

*Includes Army of the James for 1864 and 1865 data, since the two operated in the same theater under the immediate direction of Grant.

**Numbers in parentheses indicate number of men in the sample.

of small sample size (e.g., Army of Northern Virginia cavalry commanders), one can "watch" individuals age. (Stuart commanded the Cavalry Division from its inception, took over the Cavalry Corps when it was formed in September 1863, and was killed in May 1864; thus the progression and subsequent jump when the 46-year-old Wade Hampton assumed command of the Cavalry Corps.)

Of course, unit commanders were replaced for a number of reasons, and their successors were younger as the war progressed. Thus, the average age of unit commanders decreased rather than increased over the course of the war. This probably held true at the lower levels as well, but the amount of research necessary to investigate this premise expands considerably below the division level.

One should expect division commanders (on average) to be younger than corps commanders, and while this is generally the case, note that there are instances where the average age of corps commanders is less than that for division commanders.

It is also noticeable that cavalry commanders tended to be younger than infantry commanders. Does this reflect the additional toll of cavalry service on the physical endurance of individuals, the relatively easier ability of a cavalry commander to gain the notice of superiors, the willingness of the cavalry to gamble on a younger officer, the type of man attracted to cavalry service, or all of the above?

What differences are noticeable between Union and Confederate forces? I find the differences to be less noteworthy than the similarities, especially in light of the growing disparity in size, composition, and capabilities of the two sides toward the end of the war.

In addition to examining the average age of the unit commanders, I was interested in the trend in the ages of the youngest commanders, shown in Table 2. Although the age of the youngest commander in a sample size of one is obvious, it is repeated for comparison.⁶

It is interesting that in 1862, the Commander of the Army of the Potomac (McClellan) was younger than his cavalry commander, all his infantry corps commanders, and most of his infantry division commanders.

Table 2

AGE OF YOUNGEST COMMANDERS

*Army of the Potomac:**

Date	Infantry		Cavalry		Army
	Division	Corps	Division	Corps	
June 1862	34 (11)**	39 (5)	53 (1)	None	35 (1)
September 1862	33 (18)	38 (7)	38 (1)	None	35 (1)
May 1863	34 (21)	32 (7)	30 (3)	40 (1)	48 (1)
July 1863	28 (19)	32 (7)	27 (3)	38 (1)	47 (1)
May 1864	28 (21)	34 (6)	26 (4)	33 (1)	45 (2)
June 1864	28 (21)	34 (6)	26 (4)	33 (1)	45 (2)
April 1865	25 (18)	29 (7)	25 (3)	24 (2)	46 (2)

Army of Northern Virginia:

Date	Infantry		Cavalry		Army
	Division	Corps	Division	Corps	
June 1862	36 (9)	None	29 (1)	None	55 (1)
September 1862	31 (9)	38 (2)	29 (1)	None	55 (1)
May 1863	29 (8)	39 (2)	30 (1)	None	56 (1)
July 1863	29 (9)	37 (3)	30 (1)	None	56 (1)
May 1864	32 (9)	38 (3)	26 (3)	31 (1)	57 (1)
June 1864	27 (9)	38 (3)	27 (3)	46 (1)	57 (1)
April 1865	27 (9)	39 (4)	27 (3)	29 (1)	58 (1)

*Includes Army of the James for 1864 and 1865 data, since the two operated in the same theater under the immediate direction of Grant.

**Numbers in parentheses indicate number of men in the sample.

The trends in both the average age of commanders and the age of the youngest commanders are not startling, in that one would expect younger commanders over the course of a conflict as: (1) the older commanders in place at the start of the war were killed, cashiered, or promoted; (2) the younger officers gained attention through combat performance; and (3) increased command opportunities through the formation of new units outstripped the relatively meager supply of officers available from the small, regular army. While the trend toward youth is thus understandable, the absolute age of the commanders is nonetheless surprising.

Earlier, I stated that I chose the Civil War to make an initial comparison because of a prior interest, and because it satisfies the two conditions apparently necessary for young officers to rise to high command--namely, substantially increased force size, and sufficient time for young officers to prove themselves at lower levels. How do the conditions for young officers achieving command compare between the Civil War and other conflicts with substantial American force involvement? Certainly, there is no other conflict in which one can study the opposing sides and be dealing with Americans in both cases, although the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) saw substantial numbers of Americans on the "enemy" side. Still, the Revolution never saw a substantial national army; short-term militia constituted the bulk of forces in the field at any given time. For the War of 1812 (1812-1815), the Mexican War (1846-1848), and the Spanish-American War (1898-1899), the length of the wars and the size of the forces involved tend to invalidate comparisons. For World War I (1917-1918), the size of the force is analogous, but the length of the war is not. For the campaigns against the Plains Indians (1845-1890), the size and concentration of the force are not analogous. Comparisons to the Korean (1950-1953) and Vietnam (1964-1973) wars are difficult not only because of the differing technology, but also because the political leadership decided to participate in those conflicts, without pursuing the full mobilization of the physical and moral resources of the nation. Consequently, young officers were not in the field long enough to prove themselves qualified for high command, nor were the forces sufficient in size to exhaust the pool of older officers. A

comparison to World War II (1941-1945) again suffers from the technological differences but has certain similarities in length and scale of national involvement.

Some comparison can be made to American division commanders in World War II, thanks to a study done by the Combat Studies Institute of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. This study examined the records of 25 of the 197 U.S. Army division commanders during the war.⁷ For the 25, all of whom commanded divisions in combat, the average age in 1940 was 47--the oldest was 58, and the youngest (James Gavin, a major in 1940) was 33. While the average age upon assumption of division command was not given, one can infer it would be around 50. (Gavin became the youngest American division commander since the Civil War, assuming command at age 37.)⁸

While there were relatively young generals during World War II (Gavin and Robert Frederick come to mind for the Army; Curtis LeMay and Hoyt Vandenberg for the Army Air Force), they were very few. More common were young colonels, especially in the Army Air Force. The Army Air Force expanded from a proportionately smaller base than did the Army, so it was not unusual for a colonel commanding a group at the war's end to have entered the Army Air Force at the war's start. In the post-war years, those who remained to become part of the new Air Force often remained colonels for the next 20 years. While less dramatic, the rank progression in the Army was also accelerated. To cite a personal example, my father entered the Army as a first lieutenant in 1942 and was discharged as a lieutenant colonel in 1947.

The Civil War and World War II created the conditions previously suggested as requisite for a young officer to gain high command, namely, a conflict long enough for a young officer to prove himself in combat at a lower level, and a substantially expanded number of command positions (through the creation of new units and the attrition of commanding officers).

The force expansion must normally be substantial, otherwise the new command billets will be filled from the ranks of regular and reserve officers already in the force. Typically, this is done in the

early stages of the conflict anyway, and it takes a while for some of the older officers to be identified as unequal to the task. This was to some extent the case in World War II, but the number of new command billets never outstripped the supply of seasoned officers to the same degree that occurred during the Civil War. One reason for this was the way in which the Union assimilated new manpower. Largely for political reasons, the Union decided to put new recruits into newly constituted units, so the state governors could award the commands of the new units to constituents. Thus, even though the strength of the 7th New York Infantry Regiment was down to 250 men out of an authorized strength of 1000, new inductees were used to form the 121st New York, with a new colonel and regimental staff appointed by the governor of New York, who now had that many more people influenced to support him. While many new units were formed during World War II, the policy was to try to maintain the existing units at full strength by replacing losses. Further, the selection of officers for new units was not within the patronage purview of the state governors.

It seems likely that there will never be enough command positions in peacetime to satisfy the number of people who want to be commanders, even with the relatively large standing forces that the U.S. has today. Attempts to give command opportunity to the maximum number of people tend to conflict with the need to provide stability in command. One of the most common criticisms of the U.S. Army's command system in Vietnam was the frequent rotation of commanders. This turnover was the result of the shortness of the tour (normally 12 to 13 months) and the desire to give as many people as possible an opportunity to command. It was common for a captain to spend six months as a company commander and the remaining six months on battalion staff. The belief is that company commanders never had time to learn their jobs sufficiently and were usually perceived by their subordinates as transients, with consequent harmful effects on unit performance.

This frequent turnover problem--a result, in part, of an attempt to maximize the number of people with opportunity to command--persisted beyond Vietnam, especially in combat units. In the belief that the

problem was severe enough to justify a change, the Army fairly recently mandated minimum tour lengths for commanders. For example, a brigade commander assigned to a unit in West Germany must now have a waiver from the Army staff to serve less than two years in that job.

Today's promotion and command selection systems in the U.S. armed forces are based on merit (as measured through evaluation reports), qualifications (such as graduation from a staff college), and time served. The last is necessary because any system that rewards on perceived merit alone is ripe for abuse, since evaluations written by another person must be subjective. In simplest terms, who judges? And are the judges of equal competence? Thus, the time-in-grade and time-in-service requirements serve at least as a buffer (though not a foolproof barrier) against abuse of the merit evaluation process.

If it is "safe" and accepted to use time in service and time in grade as criteria for command eligibility, then there must be substantial cause, such as a national crisis that would expand the size of the armed forces, to change this predisposition.

This has been the system since the 1950s, including the period of the Vietnam War. To accommodate the particular requirements resulting from that conflict, the services adjusted the time-in-grade and service requirements so that the promotion incentive could be used sooner. For example, Table 3 compares the number of years in service commonly required to reach the indicated ranks today with that during the height of the Vietnam War.

Reflecting its relatively greater need for officers due to force expansion and the greater incentives required to attract and retain those officers, the Army made the largest adjustment. The Navy and Marine Corps made less adjustment than the Army and Air Force. Above the rank of major, adjustments were less necessary since neither the turnover rate nor the requirement was great enough. Thus, there were no "boy generals" or "boy colonels" in the U.S. armed forces during the Vietnam War.

Table 3

NUMBER OF YEARS IN SERVICE REQUIRED
TO ACHIEVE THE INDICATED RANKS 'ON TIME'

Rank	Vietnam (1969)		1987	
	Army	Air Force	Army	Air Force
1st Lieutenant	1	1.5	1.5	2
Captain	2	3	4	4
Major	7	10	11	11

The frustration for a person under a system based in part on time-in-service criteria is that no matter how well one does in command of a small unit (should that opportunity arise), he must still endure some "treading water" assignments before being considered for command of a larger unit. Whether such assignments (to a staff job, an advanced training course, or to a secondary career field) are really wastes of time or necessary is the central question. Further, there are smaller numbers of larger units--fewer divisions than brigades, fewer brigades than battalions, etc.--so not every brigade commander can become a division commander. It follows that any unusual command opportunity for a younger officer must come at the expense of an older and ostensibly more experienced officer. This is discrimination of a sort, and since those with the most power tend to be older, more experienced officers as well as products of the current system, it takes extraordinary circumstances for them to make exceptions.

Thus, there are several natural impediments to the accelerated promotion of a young officer, regardless of the time period considered: there are a lot of older officers ahead of him that want the same jobs; it is not "normal" and consequently will be resisted by many who are not in competition for the billet but who don't like the rules to be changed; and, if the young officer fails in his command, the one who chose him for the position is open to considerably more criticism than if a safer choice had been made.⁹ It often happens that an officer is promoted beyond the

level of his competence, but if an exception had to be made to promote the officer in the first place, then there is even more doubt about the judgment of the person who recommended him for promotion.

Military leaders recognize that changes to the promotion and command opportunity system can have a large effect on the morale of the force, mostly because of the signals they send rather than the specific changes. Many of today's officers in the Army and Air Force are anticipating a more conservative promotion system based on the indications already manifest. It is likely that the probability for any officer to achieve rank and command will be diminished rather than enhanced over the next few years.

What are the dangers in young officers not having an opportunity to command? Two are primary: first, many of the most capable young officers may leave the service because they perceive a lack of opportunity. There are already disincentives to service life (some of which are inherent and unlikely to be ameliorated), and lack of opportunity (or, put more crassly, the frustration of ambition) could dissuade exactly the group of aggressive individuals that the military probably should encourage. Our military forces might then lack the "fire" that young commanders have. Young commanders probably tend to be less conservative, more willing to try innovation, perhaps more likely to gamble. The ambition of younger officers can enhance the aggressive feeling of the organization, and an army needs to feel that it is (among other things) "full of fight".

The second primary danger is that the United States may enter a war with officers who have been successful in the last war and in the intervening years of peace but who are unequal to the job in the current war. As Table 4 shows, the longest interval between major American wars has been 33 years. In these intervals, the armed forces have seen considerable conflict--such as the Blackhawk War, the Seminole Wars, the campaigns against the Plains Indians, border conflicts with Mexican bandits, interventions in Asia and Central America, and the invasion of Grenada. But in every major war in which Americans have been involved, the high command at the beginning of (and sometimes throughout) the war

Table 4

NUMBER OF YEARS BETWEEN MAJOR AMERICAN WARS

War	Dates of American Involvement	Interval
-----	-----	-----
Revolution	1775 to 1783	
War of 1812	1812 to 1815	29 Years
Mexican War	1846 to 1848	31 Years
Civil War	1861 to 1865	13 Years
Spanish-American War	1898 to 1899	33 Years
World War I	1917 to 1918	18 Years
World War II	1941 to 1945	23 Years
Korean War	1950 to 1953	5 Years
Vietnam War	1964 to 1973	11 Years

has been dominated by veterans of the last major war. Perhaps because of inability or unwillingness to adapt to the conditions of the current conflict, many of the senior commanders have often been turned out within the first year. For example, when the War of 1812 began, the average age of American generals was 60. By 1814, it was 36.¹⁰ And, in the Civil War, which has served as the primary example in this paper, the trend toward younger leadership has been shown (though the most senior leadership continued to include a high proportion of officers such as Grant, Lee, Meade, and Longstreet, who had served in the Mexican War as junior officers). Young officers are less likely to "refight the last war."

I have suggested that some older commanders are unable to make the transition from peacetime to wartime command, but more generally, the lack of success of many who are commanders when a war starts may be related to the differing requirements of peacetime versus wartime command, rather than age. In peacetime, it seems that caution is more appropriate than innovation, since no one wants to lose a command by making a mistake. In contrast, war sometimes forces boldness upon a commander or, perhaps more accurately, it forces decisions that in retrospect seem bold. This may be summarized by the statement that peacetime command involves risk avoidance, while wartime command involves risk taking (though the number of risks avoided may still be greater than the number taken).

One reason for this perception is that "success" is measured differently in peacetime than in war. Peacetime success is measured in such things as exercises, management effectiveness inspections, operational readiness inspections, the Army Training and Evaluation Program, and Officer Effectiveness Reports. Two attributes currently perceived to be very important in peacetime are the ability to conserve resources (especially fiscal and material) and the ability to avoid controversy. While these abilities continue to have some virtue in war, they probably drop from top priority. Perhaps more accurately, the absence of "big things" (e.g., survival, killing opponents) in peacetime moves "little things" (e.g., appearance standards, paperwork deadlines) higher on the list of priorities for a commander.

To ensure that the armed forces are as successful as possible in war, we should make peacetime training simulate wartime conditions as nearly as possible. This is hardly a new idea, but there are limits to the extent of the simulation. Probing the nature and amount of peacetime training that results in wartime effectiveness is a difficult task and beyond the scope of this paper, but it remains true that success in peacetime is measured differently than success in wartime.

One might conclude that the optimum mix of leadership includes veterans who have "learned the right lessons" from previous wars and young officers who are unencumbered by notions appropriate for the previous conflict but inappropriate for the current one. An extension of this logic, however, could lead one to advocate involvement in a major war at least once every 30 years (or less) in order to guarantee that combat-experienced leaders from the last war are always available. It also rests upon the dangerous assumption that there will be enough time in any future major war for younger officers to emerge.

What is the "solution" to this "problem?" Should the United States expand the officer corps principally for the sake of expanding command opportunities? This is not likely to help. Conversely, it is likely to be counterproductive, since "hollow" command opportunities will not yield the same benefits as real ones.¹¹ Further, it relates to a conflict which has recurred since the formation of the Republic.

The basic theories are: a large standing army is required to guarantee a sufficiently well trained force, especially in today's world of potentially "come as you are" wars; while a small standing army saves money and can be sufficiently supplemented by mobilization of manpower with some military training.¹² In either case, a corps (of some size difficult to determine) of well trained, experienced, professional, regular and reserve officers around which a mobilized citizenry can form may be the best alternative, and it is certainly not the worst.

How do we maintain such a corps of officers? What is desired primarily is an opportunity system (which must be linked to the promotion system) that is perceived as fair, largely predictable and free from abuse, yet flexible and perceptive enough to recognize talent. It must produce commanders who know not only how but when to be cautious or bold. Most people recognize that a totally equitable system which meets these goals is highly unlikely, though that should not discourage the attempt.

The evidence from the Civil War and other American wars would indicate that some--but certainly not all--young officers can be successful if given the opportunity to command large units. It would also indicate that the longer a war lasts, the greater the chance that a young officer will get that opportunity.

To a degree, it boils down to probabilities: there is less chance that a young officer (even one judged to be exceptional) will be a successful large unit commander than there is that an older officer (judged to be qualified) will. As long as there is insufficient evidence to disprove this widely accepted theory, it would not seem justified to take the risk of altering the command selection system for the sake of trying to find the exception, despite the success of some of those exceptions in our past.

NOTES

¹ Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, enlarged edition, 1984, p. 191.

² One thing that hasn't changed as much as many of the other factors is the harshness of conditions for a soldier in the field. Extremes of climate and sleep deprivation combined with the confusing aspects of war still cause bad decisions, degraded performance, and death.

³ Further, it was customary in the post-war Army to be known by the highest brevet rank achieved, with officers routinely addressing one another as "General" even though they might be serving in considerably lesser ranks. A logical outgrowth of this practice was for many regiments to have several generals on the roster.

⁴ While the group of "boy wonders" is not strictly defined, it might include the following (all Major Generals, U.S.V.):

	Age at End of War -----	West Point? -----
Wesley Merritt, cavalry	30	Yes
Francis Barlow, infantry	30	No
Adelbert Ames, artillery/infantry	29	Yes
James Wilson, engineers/cavalry	27	Yes
Nelson Miles, infantry	25	No
Emory Upton, artillery/infantry/cavalry	25	Yes
George Custer, cavalry	25	Yes
Ranald Mackenzie, engineers/infantry/cavalry	24	Yes

Of these "boy wonders," Merritt, Miles, Upton, Custer, and Mackenzie remained in the Army after the war, and all reverted to their "permanent" lower ranks. Merritt became a brigadier general again in 1887 and a major general in 1895. Miles reached brigadier general in 1880, major general in 1890, and lieutenant general in 1900. Upton never made general again, committing suicide (he had an inoperable brain tumor and, many contend, was depressed over the state of the Army) as a colonel in 1881. Since Upton had returned to the artillery, his initial branch, it is probable that he would never have made general again, but his fame is considerable for his writings on military policy. Custer also never made general again, although he's probably the most famous of all, dying as a lieutenant colonel in 1876. Mackenzie may be the most unappreciated. He became a brigadier general again in 1882 but retired for medical reasons (he had been wounded seven times, suffered from repeated exposure during hard campaigns against the Indians, had been severely injured in a wagon

accident, and had syphilis) in 1884. He died relatively unknown in 1889, perhaps the greatest Indian fighter the Army ever produced.

While the Confederacy did not have the regular/volunteer and brevet systems, it still had its "boy wonders," including the following who were all Brigadier Generals, C.S.A., or above, at death or at the end of the war:

	Age at Death or End of War	West Point?
	-----	-----
Stephen D. Lee, Lt Gen, artillery/cavalry/infantry	31	Yes
J.E.B. Stuart, Maj Gen, cavalry	31/May 64	Yes
W. Dorsey Pender, Maj Gen, infantry	29/Jul 63	Yes
Fitzhugh Lee, Maj Gen, cavalry	29	Yes
Lunsford Lomax, Maj Gen, staff/cavalry	29	Yes
Matthew Butler, Maj Gen, cavalry	29	No
Joseph Wheeler, Maj Gen, infantry/cavalry	28	Yes
Thomas Rosser, Brig Gen, artillery/cavalry	28	Yes
Evander Law, Brig Gen, infantry	28	No
Robert Hoke, Maj Gen, infantry	27	No
Stephen Ramseur, Maj Gen, artillery/infantry	27/Oct 64	Yes
W.H.F. Lee, Maj Gen, cavalry	27	No
G. Moxley Sorrell, Brig Gen, staff/infantry	27	No
Basil Duke, Brig Gen, cavalry	26	No

It is interesting to note the disproportionate representation of cavalry officers. For the Confederacy, this may be attributable in part to the relative youth of Stuart, who was Chief of Cavalry in the Army of Northern Virginia, had considerable influence on who was chosen for subordinate cavalry commands, and who in light of his own age was probably less restrained in recommending the promotion of younger officers and less inclined to recommend the promotion of his elders.

The Union "boy wonders" who remained in the post-war Army are not the only ones who again served as generals. When the U.S. declared war on Spain in 1898, several of the "boy wonders" who had left the Army volunteered their services and returned to active duty. Adelbert Ames became a brigadier general of volunteers, and James Wilson returned as a major general of volunteers, staying on to retire in 1901 as a brigadier general in the Regular Army.

Further, several of the Confederates returned to uniform to fight for the "Yankees" during the Spanish-American War. Fitzhugh Lee, Matthew Butler, and Joseph Wheeler returned as major generals of volunteers, and Thomas Rosser returned as a brigadier general. Lee and Wheeler were integrated into the Regular Army, both retiring as brigadier generals (in 1901 and 1900, respectively). As might be expected, the return of the old Rebel generals led to several anecdotes. Perhaps the most famous concerns Wheeler, who reportedly said when watching a Spanish retreat in Cuba, "Look at those Yankees run!"

⁵ One survey was made of armies that operated principally in the Western theater (though they finished the war in North Carolina) to see if there were any great differences in the results. Generally, commanders in both the Union and Confederate armies in the West were older than their counterparts in the East, but this does not hold in every case.

AVERAGE AGE OF COMMANDERS

Union Forces in North Carolina:

Date	Infantry		Cavalry		Army
	Division	Corps	Division	Corps	
April 1865	39.6 (19)*	41.3 (6)	29.0 (1)	None	34.6 (3)

Confederate Forces in North Carolina:

April 1865	40.3 (8)	41.0 (3)	28.5 (2)	47.0 (1)	58.0 (1)
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*Numbers in parentheses indicate number of men in the sample.

⁶ Again, a check of the youngest commanders in the Western Armies was made for comparison:

AGE OF YOUNGEST COMMANDER

Union Forces in North Carolina:

Date	Infantry		Cavalry		Army
	Division	Corps	Division	Corps	
April 1865	29 (19)*	36 (6)	29 (1)	None	33 (3)

Confederate Forces in North Carolina:

April 1865	27 (8)	31 (3)	28 (2)	47 (1)	58 (1)
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*Numbers in parentheses indicate number of men in the sample.

⁷ The rationale for the sample selection is included in an article by Lieutenant Colonel Gary H. Wade, U. S. Army, "World War II Division Commanders," *Military Review*, March 1986, p. 61.

⁸ General Ridgway manifested awareness of the resistance to the elevation of young officers to command in the justification of his recommendation for Gavin's promotion: "The relative rank of this officer has been considered..." Quoted in Clay Blair, *Ridgway's Paratroopers*, Dial Press, Garden City, New York, 1985, p. 300.

Many would suggest that once a person is promoted to a job beyond his capabilities, it is likely that he will be promoted again, since one way of getting a person out of a job in which he's failing is to promote him again. This doesn't make sense, but it has been done to avoid a fuss.

⁹ One advantage that younger men tend to have is physical. They are better able to endure the rigors of life in the field. While field command may not be as physically demanding now as it was 125 years ago, it is still tough.

¹⁰ Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, enlarged edition, 1984, p. 123.

¹¹ Commander Winston W. Cornelius, U. S. Navy, "Too Many Senior Officers; Not Enough for Them to Do," *Proceedings*, U.S. Naval Institute, August 1974, pp. 80-81.

¹² Though oversimplified, these two positions have often been identified as the "Upton school" or the "Palmer school" after two army officers of considerable intelligence and dedication though opposite inclination.

SOURCES

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